

At a glance

Katy O'Callaghan

This publication presents the results of a comprehensive research program on Indigenous Australians in vocational education and training (VET), along with feedback from over 200 people who attended a research forum on Indigenous VET in August 2005.

The planning and implementation of both the research strategy and the forum were undertaken in a partnership between the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) and the former Australian Indigenous Training Advisory Council (AITAC) of the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) Board.

Key messages from the research

- Indigenous people receive various benefits from VET. While they may not achieve a paid employment outcome immediately, they almost always receive a personal benefit, such as improved self-esteem. Even students who stop training without completing any units benefit in terms of gaining confidence and workplace skills.
- The following seven key factors lead to positive outcomes for Indigenous Australians when present all of the time.
 - 1 Community involvement and ownership
 - 2 Indigenous identities, cultures, knowledge and values
 - 3 Working in true partnerships
 - 4 Flexibility in course design, content and delivery
 - 5 Quality staff and committed advocacy
 - 6 Extensive student support services
 - 7 Appropriate funding that allows for sustainability.
- Training needs to be 'demand responsive' rather than 'supply driven'. For example, in desert areas, programs that are integrated into the social and cultural framework of the community achieve more successful and sustainable outcomes (Young, Schaber & Guenther, forthcoming).
- Building strong rapport with Indigenous students and communities, and sharing knowledge between Indigenous and Western cultures, leads to positive outcomes. A responsive and culturally-affirming learning environment is created by negotiating all aspects of training with students and community and family members in an informal, collaborative manner.
- Partnerships should be flexible to allow for unforeseen issues and changes. Expectations of all parties should be made clear from the beginning, with an understanding that the term 'governance' holds different connotations for Indigenous people, compared with government perspectives (Blair & Hanlen, forthcoming).



Artwork by Davina Kelly.

- More Indigenous staff are required in order to keep pace with Indigenous participation in VET. There is a particular demand for young and female staff, as well as those able to work in regional and remote locations (Kemmis et al., forthcoming).
- Successful outcomes are achieved where extensive support is available, such as literacy and numeracy programs, mentoring, one-on-one tutoring (McGlusky & Thaker, forthcoming) and wider support to gain and maintain employment (Callan & Gardner 2005).
- Funding must be flexible to allow long-term planning and accommodate the above factors.

Key messages from forum participants

- The training process is as important as the outcome. Social aspects such as having fun and building relationships are valued outcomes. Training is also a way of building pride in Indigenous culture, sharing traditional learning styles, creating role models and fostering motivation and resilience. Whole-of-life support is important before, during and after training.
- Forum participants suggested actions that should be taken in relation to each of the six priority areas identified in *Partners in a learning culture: The way forward* (ANTA 2005), as summarised at the end of this publication (see page 13).

Indigenous disclaimer

Indigenous Australians are warned that images of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people appear in this document. At the time of publication this did not include images of deceased persons.

A word from Bill Wilson

Co-chair of the former Australian Indigenous Training Advisory Council

Ja Gawuru Yingu Ngaja Gurran¹. This means road or path from this day today, to the next day tomorrow, this new track. There have been many of us involved in the journey to this day, not just people working for governments or big organisations, but community people, young and old. We need to acknowledge our past as we begin to talk about this new track we are taking.

Partners in a learning culture (ANTA 2000a) was Australia's first national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander strategy for vocational education and training. The follow-up blueprint for implementation (ANTA 2000b) laid clear maps for finding our way. The Australian Indigenous Training Advisory Council (AITAC) had the job of monitoring the progress of the blueprint. The research agenda we are discussing is critical to this monitoring.

When I started in this business 23 years ago, research had a bad name and deservedly so. Too often Indigenous people were subjected to research without being involved in any meaningful way other than being the subjects of yet another research activity that led nowhere. Blackfellas were researched to death, and yet little seemed to result from it. But things have changed. I see research as important to our people. It substantiates what we know; it helps us negotiate with people who have resources, because unless it is documented people don't take it seriously.

AITAC worked in partnership with NCVER to develop a research strategy (NCVER & AITAC 2004) which is mapped to the *Partners in a learning culture* strategy. It has helped us review what we've done, confirm our objectives and work to establish how and where we need to shift direction.

We've found there is unfinished business. Progress in implementing the strategy has been gradual, patchy and uneven. A decade after the journey began there is still a pressing need for improvement.

But we now have a way forward—six priorities to take us through to 2010. *The way forward* (ANTA 2005) is about more than continuing the work of the blueprint; it is about building on relationships and embracing partnerships.

During the research forum, we worked together to flesh out what these priorities mean to each of us, and how we intend to take personal responsibility to make things happen in our own backyards. We all need to do this if the objectives of the strategy are to be met. If we do this, in ten years time, when I look back on what we've achieved, I'll be able to talk about the massive shift, the remarkable improvements made by our people.

¹ Language used with permission from Henry Fourmile Senior, Elder and traditional owner of the Queballum (tribal name meaning cyclone) of the Gimuy (Cairns) area.

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- Bill Wilson for opening the forum and for his enormous contribution in the planning and implementation of the research strategy
- all members of the former AITAC for their partnership in both formulating the research strategy and facilitating the forum discussion sessions
- the students of Tauondi College for personalising the discussions by generously sharing their stories and perspectives
- the researchers who continue to work with us, and for their presentations to the forum
- all the participants who shared with us their valuable knowledge, expertise and ideas.

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An At a glance is a synthesis of research focused on a particular topic of interest, drawing on information from various sources.

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Setting the scene

Australia's national strategy for Indigenous people in vocational education and training (VET), *Partners in a learning culture* (ANTA 2000a), spans five years until the end of 2005. During 2003, progress against this strategy was evaluated in a mid-term review, which showed areas where positive outcomes had been achieved, and highlighted others where not enough progress had been made or was known (Kemmis et al. 2004).

As a result of the issues identified, the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) and the Australian Indigenous Training Advisory Council (AITAC) developed a comprehensive research strategy to fill some of the gaps over 2003 to 2006 and to ensure that policy development and practice is informed by sound evidence, high quality data and critical evaluation (NCVER & AITAC 2004). The 2005 NCVER Research Forum on Indigenous vocational education and training brought together practitioners, policy-makers, students and researchers in order to present the results of this research program.

During the forum, the four original objectives of *Partners in a learning culture*, around which the research strategy is structured, were addressed. Forum participants were encouraged to reflect on the findings of the research in their own context, and also to advise on actions that should be taken on the issues raised to drive *The way forward* and the six priority areas identified therein for improving VET for Indigenous Australians.

Objective 1: Involvement and participation in decision making

At the time the research strategy was developed Indigenous involvement, advice and staffing in the VET sector had improved at higher levels but remained patchy and unclear in other levels of the system. Hence, various research projects focusing on the local level have been conducted. One such project is examining the roles and experiences of existing Indigenous staff in the VET sector in terms of where they are located, what they are doing, and how well their employers support them (Kemmis et al., forthcoming). Another is looking at the role VET should play in providing the most appropriate training support for Indigenous communities, organisations and individuals in governing their own affairs (Blair & Hanlen, forthcoming).

Objective 2: Participation, retention and achievement in VET

Indigenous participation is high in VET—there are now 56 700 Indigenous Australians undertaking VET (Butler et al., forthcoming). Numbers have been strong for a while, which is partly a reflection of the younger Indigenous population—a median age of 20.5 years, compared to 36.1 years for the non-Indigenous population.

The issue is not one of participation in VET but of retention, completion and (re-)enrolment in higher level, industry-relevant courses most likely to lead to the employment and economic outcomes emphasised in objective 4.

Areas of particular interest which have been researched include the effect of VET on recidivism and re-offending (Callan & Gardner 2005), and the role of literacy and numeracy for Indigenous students for whom English is a second language (Kral & Falk 2004; see page 11).

As most Indigenous people do not live in major cities—31% compared with 26% who live in remote and very remote areas, and 43% who live in inner and outer regional areas—it is important to explore regional differences. *Growing the desert* (Young, Schaber & Guenther, forthcoming) is one such project investigating VET provision in the desert regions of Australia (see page 6).

Objective 3: Culturally-appropriate and flexible delivery

Once it is known what Indigenous people want from training, it makes sense to explore how the VET system can ensure such outcomes are achieved. As identified in the mid-term review, the focus has mainly been on using information and communication technologies.

AITAC members advised that while a lot is known about culturally-appropriate and flexible delivery through previous research and practice, there have been limited attempts to clarify this information.

Hence, the research strategy included a systematic review of research on appropriate VET for Indigenous Australians to critically examine and synthesise evidence for the key factors required to ensure the full range of outcomes are possible and achieved (Miller, forthcoming; see 'What really works' on page 6 for results).

Objective 4: Links between VET, industry and employment

Knowing that employment outcomes from VET remain lower for Indigenous Australians compared with other Australians, NCVER set out to hear directly from Indigenous students what outcomes they value, whether their aspirations are achieved and how VET can be improved through a survey of Indigenous VET students' experiences and outcomes (Butler et al., forthcoming; see 'Things that matter' on page 4 or results).

Evidence shows over half the difference between Indigenous and non-Indigenous employment status in Australia is directly linked to level of education people attain (Hunter 2004).

The Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) scheme accounts for a very significant proportion of those Indigenous people in 'employment' (Biddle 2004; Misko 2004).

The things that matter

In 2004, NCVET conducted a national survey of Indigenous VET students to find out more about Indigenous people's engagement with VET—what encourages Indigenous people to start and stay in training and what benefits they get from training.

Interviews were conducted with 785 Indigenous Australians in 70 different locations, covering five regions—major cities, inner regional, outer regional, remote and very remote areas. These VET students were asked about the courses they undertook in 2003 and what they were doing in 2004. Specially trained Indigenous interviewers collected the information and an Indigenous protocol manager was employed in each location to coordinate local involvement.

What people want

The survey found that students undertake training for many reasons. The main reasons students undertake training are to improve knowledge (43%) and get a job (42%). Other reasons include to improve confidence (24%), help in the community (20%) or get skills for community/voluntary work (19%).

Young people undertake VET for work purposes and to attain a qualification. Women and older people are most concerned with personal achievement and self-esteem. People in very remote areas more often had community-related reasons for doing training.

For Indigenous Australians who started training and did not complete their course (17%), reasons given vary. The most frequently cited reasons include being needed by family (22%), getting a job (13%), moving (11%) and not being able to afford it (11%).

... [the training] clashed with my other responsibilities ...

Male aged 25–34 years, major city

... sometimes it is difficult for single mothers to do training courses, especially if they are working full-time ...

Female aged 35–44 years, inner regional

... the fact that I had financial problems for rent and food ...

Female aged 20–24 years, inner regional

What people get

Almost all students feel they received benefits in employment, personal and community spheres. The most frequently cited benefits were personal: improved confidence and self-esteem (91%) and improved ability to communicate and relate to people (89%).

... I serve on three committees. I wouldn't have had the confidence to do that otherwise ...

Female aged 25–34 years, inner regional

Two key employment-related benefits rated highly: improvement in workplace skills (87%) and understanding how businesses and workplaces run (75%).

... [the training] helped me move on in my career. I was in reception before [the] course. Now I am a health worker ...

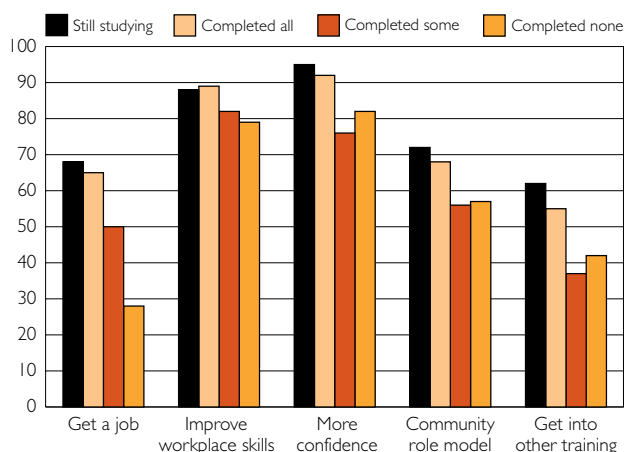
Male aged 25–34 years, inner regional

Over 70% of students feel their course helped them become more involved in the community. Remote and very remote students received the most community benefits.

... I learnt how to look after our Elders, how to communicate with them, joking, conversation and the love I have for them ...

Female aged 35–44 years, remote

Figure 1: Percentages of people reporting a benefit, by study status in 2004



Students who stop training, without completing any units, report the lowest level of benefits, particularly in terms of getting a job. But, interestingly, they still gain significant benefits, especially in terms of confidence and workplace skills (see figure 1).

Overall, as illustrated in table 1, the benefits people receive from VET exceed the reasons people starting training. For example, while 42% of people undertook training in order to get a job, 62% said their training actually helped them get or change their job. In total, 81% of people were working, studying or participating in CDEP (people could be doing more than one of these at the same time). Similarly, while only 19% aimed to get skills for community/voluntary work, 68% actually received this benefit and 24% were undertaking community/voluntary work following their training.

Table 1: Reason for doing VET, benefits received and activity at time of survey (2004)

Reason for doing VET	%	Benefits received	%	Current activity (in 2004)	%
Get a job	42	Helped to get a job or better/different job	62	Paid work	45
				CDEP	22
Get extra skills for a job	28	Improved workplace skills	87	Looking for work	32
Improve confidence and self-esteem	24	More confidence/feel better about self	91	Studying	47
Help in the community	20	Being a role model for others in community	67	Looking after family or community	42
Get skills for community/voluntary work	19	Got skills for work in community	68	Community or voluntary work	24

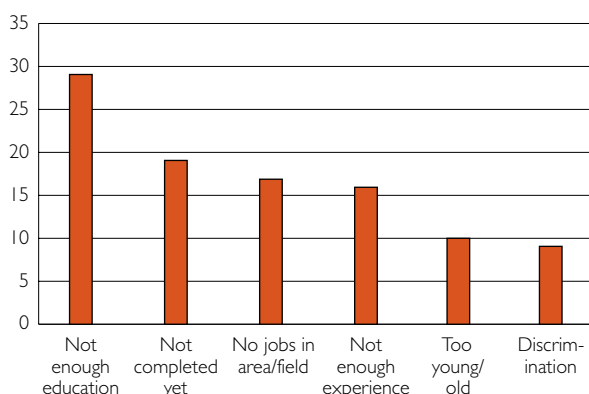
Note: People were able to cite as many reasons, benefits or activities as applied to them at the time of the survey.

In 2004, less than half of the students were in paid work. Another quarter were in unpaid or voluntary work and one in five were participating in CDEP. Almost half were still studying. Students from inner and outer regional Australia were looking for work the longest. The main reason students felt they could not find work was due to not having enough education (see figure 2).

Satisfaction levels with training are generally very high. The most highly rated aspects of training were:

- being with other Indigenous people (90%)
- talking/communicating with others (86%)
- access to computers (82%)
- understanding how to finish a course (82%)
- flexibility of course/teachers/institute (81%)
- quality of teachers/tutors (81%).

Figure 2: Reasons people cannot find work



Support services do not get such a high rating. Childcare facilities, assistance to find work and level of financial help score the lowest 'good' ratings. The level of financial assistance was of concern to some students. Students in the major cities and remote areas are least satisfied with the level of financial help received.

... more funding for specific equipment would be good as it adds more costs to being able to do the course ...

Male aged over 45 years, major city

The commitment of other students is also an issue for some. This had the greatest impact on students in courses above diploma level and in outer-regional areas.

... no commitment from other students—made others wild ...

Male aged 20–24 years, inner regional

These results raise a number of policy issues. One question to emerge is what is the appropriate balance in what we want VET to achieve? Do we need to develop a wider set of performance measures to capture outcomes such as self-confidence and community participation? A related issue is the relatively poor employment outcomes for Indigenous Australians who have participated in VET. Is VET too often divorced from local labour markets and what should the role of VET be when employment opportunities are limited?

What really works

A systematic review of research on Indigenous VET was undertaken as part of the overall strategy to help us understand the things that matter and how to put them into practice (Miller, forthcoming). Research from the last ten years was evaluated and the most relevant and high quality studies were examined in detail.

The review's evidence corroborates the findings of the student survey; that training outcomes aspired to and achieved by Indigenous people are not just vocational, and that the most important outcomes may in fact be personal. These personal outcomes, such as improved self-esteem and cultural identity, are fundamental and facilitate the achievement of other outcomes, such as completing a course, moving to other education, getting a job, looking after family or running a community organisation.

So how are these positive outcomes achieved? Indigenous communities are diverse and dispersed, and while geographic location does matter, are there some critical elements in training required to ensure positive outcomes, wherever the training is delivered. The research provides clear evidence on the key factors that lead to positive outcomes for Indigenous Australians in VET, regardless of context, time and place. These factors are:

- 1 Community involvement and ownership
- 2 Indigenous identities, cultures, knowledge and values
- 3 Working in true partnerships
- 4 Flexibility in course design, content and delivery
- 5 Quality staff and committed advocacy
- 6 Extensive student support services
- 7 Appropriate funding that allows for sustainability.

All factors must be present all of the time for positive outcomes to be achieved. This is nowhere more clearly illustrated than in relation to residents of the desert region.

Latest research

Growing the desert

Australia's desert is a vast region covering five jurisdictions and 45% of the Australian land mass. Around 34 000 Indigenous people live in the desert and the population is growing fast.

Most people live in small, isolated settlements, with diverse cultures and languages. Two-thirds of these settlements have less than 50 people. Only half have a primary school, less than a quarter have a secondary school to Year 10 and just a handful of the larger communities have a senior secondary school. Essential services are difficult to maintain and community infrastructure is minimal.

More than half these people speak an Indigenous language as their first language and there is little opportunity for immersion in non-Indigenous lifestyles and English language contexts.

For Indigenous people living in desert regions, the number of those in the labour force, apart from CDEP, is very low, as is the number who have completed post-compulsory school—13% complete Years 11 and 12 and around 4% have VET qualifications. Most VET participation is in subject-only and basic education/life skills courses at certificate I and II levels.

In some places and in some fields there are strong links between VET and Indigenous communities. This link is probably most evident in the creative arts area. However, the reality is most of the VET offerings across the desert are not aligned with local work or relevant community activities.

There is evidence, though, that outside the formal system substantial education activity is occurring, as Indigenous people living in desert regions find their own 'place-based' forms of engagement with training. A vast number of ad hoc, capacity-building programs have sprung up, which suggests there is demand for learning opportunities that are less aligned with mainstream industry and occupations.

Broader recognition of the range of economic participation by people living in the desert, particularly within the traditional economy, could better harness the role of VET towards tangible local pathways and outcomes.

In central Australia, for example, a group of women from remote communities have set up Training Nintiringtjaku. This initiative supports the professional development and employment of Aboriginal mediators in the planning and delivery of vocational education in their communities. The workers facilitate training that supports community sustainability. The program is community directed and endorsed and builds on local strengths and assets.

Another example is the championing of information and communication technologies by Indigenous organisations, including the strong Indigenous media sector. While there is limited uptake of information and communication technologies for formal education, Indigenous people in the desert are embracing technology for cultural maintenance, sharing local information and accessing basic services like banking. These activities support a level of knowledge, skills and ownership which can enhance learning and employment opportunities.

Metta Young and Evelyn Schaber, Desert Knowledge Centre for Cooperative Research Centre

The seven key factors

I Community involvement and ownership

The systematic review of research found that Indigenous community ownership and involvement in training, from start to finish, is the single most important factor in achieving positive outcomes. The more control and authority a community has in training, the more successful that training will be.

'Ownership' may involve ongoing consultation with community leaders, the involvement of Elders and local Indigenous mentors in programs and formal partnerships with Indigenous organisations. In rural and remote areas especially, ownership involves communities making decisions about what training is needed, for whom, when and where it is delivered, and embedding it in community business.

The formal involvement of Indigenous community members in training needs to be based on developing personal relationships and mutual trust. This is established by respecting and incorporating different cultural, social and linguistic backgrounds and expectations.



Latest research

A role for VET in Indigenous governance

Through a series of 'yarn-times' and an extensive literature review, Indigenous voices from diverse cultures across Australia have provided rich information on how VET can help Indigenous people develop culturally effective 'governance' models for their communities.

The research confirmed that governance is not an Indigenous concept. Indigenous peoples see governance as a collective concept rather than about power, relationships and accountability. They have very different expectations about what is required from their people in governance roles than governments do. For Indigenous people, the first priority is the community. Any decision can only be made with the approval of the community. This difference in expectations between governments and Indigenous communities creates enormous pressures for the people in governance roles and has resulted in rapid burnout for many.

Compliance with government policy is viewed as a survival strategy but many Indigenous people feel they do not know the rules and are disadvantaged in accessing funding. They believe VET can play a role in empowering communities with knowledge of the 'rules of the game' and strategies to benefit their communities.

Yarn-time participants felt that VET can provide a range of skills for Indigenous people involved in governance roles including:

- oral, written, computer and financial literacies
- standard English language and jargon
- accountability
- conflict resolution
- business management
- information technology
- balancing community and governance.

A broad framework for governance training could help individual communities develop their own models of Indigenous governance. Such a framework needs to be grounded in relationships with people's countries and kinship systems, and include a way of educating governments, organisations and the public sector on the Indigenous concept of governance. As Cornell (2003) puts it: 'Indigenous nations have been problem-solving for a long time. They have had to in order to survive'.

Associate Professor Nerida Blair and Cheryl Newton, Umulliko Indigenous Higher Education Research Centre, University of Newcastle; and Kate Rose, TAFE NSW, Hunter Institute

2 Indigenous identities, cultures, knowledge and values

Training needs to reaffirm students' own identities, cultures and histories to provide the appropriate space in which people can acquire skills for employment, community development and self-determination. Participation in education and training is a social activity, and as such must be negotiated between students and teachers to ensure that the structures, environment and content are congruent with Indigenous backgrounds.

Training that is structured around knowledge-sharing between teachers and students will provide a more relevant context for learning. 'Both ways' training that equally recognises Western and Indigenous cultures can be implemented by developing components of training based on local Indigenous knowledge. Recognition of prior learning (RPL) can be one way of acknowledging individuals' experiences. Peer support is also seen as culturally important and teamwork can reinforce positive outcomes.



3 True partnerships

The development of 'true' partnerships is essential as they establish a process through which Indigenous community aspirations can be incorporated within the priorities of VET providers, industry and government. Partnerships involve joining up with organisations, within communities and with external parties that have the professional, financial and structural means to assist Indigenous communities to meet their aspirations. These types of partnerships can reduce duplication of services and wastage of effort.

Caution must be exercised in negotiating partnerships without fully understanding the dynamics of the relationships and expectations involved. A number of studies stress that partnerships should be formalised and expectations of all parties made clear at the beginning. True partnerships should be flexible enough to react to unforeseen issues and allow for changes to occur.

From the field

Focus on culture and identity—the Tauondi approach

Tauondi College in Port Adelaide is an independent, Indigenous community-run training organisation that has been in operation since 1974. Tauondi has recently established a successful VET in Schools program.

Tauondi and its students see its advantage as its culturally-appropriate approach. Tauondi provides an opportunity for Aboriginal students to 'touch their roots' and 'reconnect with culture and identity'.

Damien Shen, Tauondi's VET in Schools coordinator, says 'it's about people and relationships... students are able to hang out with other Aboriginal students, chat and catch up with family.'

Tauondi currently runs VET in Schools courses in hospitality, art, information technology, horticulture, community services and automotive. The college operates using cultural protocols and practices and each course incorporates Aboriginal culture. For example the hospitality students work with native foods as well as Western foods.

Other important strategies adopted by Tauondi include:

- mentoring students to create and support strong networks within the community—Tauondi are extending their mentoring program to Years 8 and 9 to help improve retention in schools
- meeting the broader needs of students—for example, by providing transport to and from homes, schools, training, and the workplace
- forming strategic partnerships with organisations such as Adelaide University and the Motor Trades Association to gain further exposure and help the dollars go further
- networking with funding bodies—sharing the vision and taking a 'never accept no' attitude.

Tauondi College, Port Adelaide

From the field

A negotiated program—Swan View Senior High School

Western Australia's Swan View Senior High School has one of the largest Aboriginal student populations in Perth. Three years ago the drop out rate for Aboriginal students after Year 10 was around 80%. Now almost all complete Year 12.

How did the school reverse this chronic drop-out pattern so quickly?

It started with a radical review of the school experience which found that a far more supportive and culturally-appropriate model of schooling was required. Surveys with students found they were bored, had conflict with teachers, experienced feelings of shame and were behind. They needed an alternative pathway.

The school set up the Access Program underpinned by school-based traineeships. This program now has 73 students and 30 Indigenous school-based trainees.

The secret to the program's success was developing strong relationships with students, parents and staff and negotiating all aspects of learning. By involving parents and family members in an informal, collaborative manner and establishing a healthy two-way dialogue with students, the school created a comfortable and culturally-affirming environment for learning.

Pastoral care was integrated into the program, including a rapid response to absenteeism and other early intervention strategies. This helped students overcome problems that may otherwise have seen them drop out of school.

This model gives students more of the 'three Rs'—Respect, Responsibility and Resilience.

Geoff Holt, Swan View Senior High School

4 Flexibility in course design, content and delivery

Positive outcomes rely heavily on the flexibility of VET systems, policies, organisations, programs and staff. Flexibility ensures that communities can maintain involvement throughout the training process, programs can be adapted according to local conditions, and funding can be more appropriately distributed. Some key requirements include:

- workplace, hands-on and practical course delivery
- community-based training delivery in rural and remote areas
- allowing and taking time to develop programs and respond to change.

Indigenous-specific training materials are important to ensure that training is accepted, relevant and effective. If resources are not available to adapt training packages, there can be a negative impact on students' participation and perceptions of the training culture.

Providers' administrative policies can also be made more flexible to suit students and communities. For example, some colleges run by Indigenous people allow students to defer training for personal, family and community reasons without recording 'failed' subjects.



5 Quality staff and committed advocacy

There is clear evidence that the effectiveness of VET programs is directly affected by the commitment, expertise, understanding and sensitivity of teachers, tutors, support staff and administrators. The evidence also shows a need to appoint and develop more Indigenous people in these roles (see 'Recruiting and retaining Indigenous staff' on page 10).

Employing staff that build strong rapport and relationships, and interact with their students and local communities in open and mutually respectful ways, will make a significant difference. There is still a major need for cross-cultural

training for people who work with Indigenous students and communities at all levels. This needs go beyond teaching 'cultural awareness' to actually giving people skills in Indigenous training and reconciliation strategies, pastoral care strategies, and delivering courses in Indigenous studies.

The employment of Indigenous teachers, mentors and other staff is a clear means by which community ownership and involvement can be exercised. The lack of Indigenous teachers and tutors across the system is a major concern.

Latest research

Recruiting and retaining Indigenous staff

Despite policy intentions, there has been a decline in the number of Indigenous staff in VET in recent years to slightly below the national target of 2.1%. This shortfall in staff would be even more serious if the targets for Indigenous employment were set not at the level of Indigenous people in the Australian population but at the much higher level of Indigenous participation in VET, on the grounds that Indigenous students need Indigenous teachers and role models. And if the targets took into account location, age and gender, there would be major need for more young staff, more female staff and more staff in regional and remote places.

The ageing and mobility of Indigenous VET staff, the demand for qualified Indigenous people in all sectors and the continuing large number of Indigenous students in VET, means the need for a new generation of Indigenous staff in VET is becoming more pressing.

A study of the experiences of existing Indigenous staff in VET across the nation has uncovered obstacles at all stages of the employment cycle. Addressing these obstacles will help to attract more Indigenous staff to the VET sector, and to retain them.

Some Indigenous people participating in this study describe current recruitment and selection processes as culturally-unfriendly. Mentoring can be a major benefit but it is not available to all staff. Many Indigenous staff feel locked into Indigenous roles and require better access to professional development to work at higher levels and in different contexts. Succession planning is also difficult in the context of casualisation and uncertainties about funding for positions.

Furthermore, Indigenous staff are often involved in a variety of capacity-building activities with their communities that demand their time and energy, yet feel their VET employers regard these activities as 'other' rather than crucially connected to their working lives.

Organisations that take a community development approach manage Indigenous employment best. They are culturally-sensitive about issues for Indigenous staff across all stages of the employment cycle, from position identification to succession planning, and see the employment of each Indigenous person in relation to building community capacity. They identify people in consultation with the community who can become students, then move into staff roles and assume positions as leaders, who will then move on and make space for the next generation already coming along behind. Staff in these organisations stay in close connection with the community because the community is their life blood, as well as their purpose.

Professor Stephen Kemmis, Ros Brennan Kemmis and Marianne Thurling, Charles Sturt University

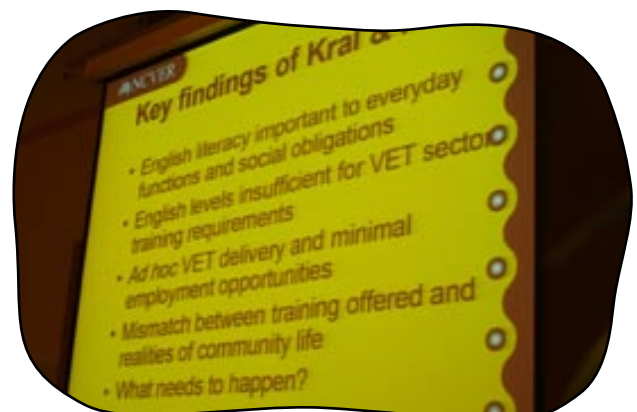
6 Student support services

The provision of financial, educational, social and cultural support through training providers and their networks is essential for Indigenous people to access and remain in training.

Additional tutoring is often needed, based on individuals' backgrounds and needs. The most frequently cited barrier to positive outcomes is limited literacy and numeracy skills. Many studies find that the most effective way to improve these skills is to build practical components into other delivery (see 'What works in adult literacy' on page 11).

'Non-academic difficulties' continue to have a major impact on success rates in training. Cultural support through mentoring and access to role models is critical. Indigenous units in TAFE colleges fulfil a range of important roles, including providing cultural, financial, housing and counselling support, but a large proportion of Indigenous people in mainstream programs are not accessing these units.

There are also too few programs to assist students with seeking or attaining employment. This is a continuing area of concern for Indigenous VET students. Three research programs related to *Partners in a learning culture* are addressing this issue. One is looking at exemplary organisations in the CDEP scheme, which is providing training as part of the program and linking this into secured mainstream employment opportunities for participants. Another is focused on building sustainable e-learning products and opportunities for Indigenous communities that link students to employment. The third is reviewing Indigenous employment programs.



7 Sustainability and funding

Funding arrangements need to be readily understood and support long-term planning to ensure good practices can be fully and appropriately implemented.

Mainstream funding does not recognise the different philosophical approaches to training between TAFE institutes, providers run by Indigenous people and those that are not, and may result in efforts being focused on getting numbers rather than providing highest quality training. For some time, there has been a reliance on 'supplementary' annual funding and specific short-term project-based funding for Indigenous training. This creates uncertainty and often places providers in direct competition with each other.

Funding models need to be flexible enough to allow for change, while providing some surety for the longer term and reducing administrative burdens on providers that have to juggle various funding buckets and accountabilities.



Latest research

What works in adult literacy

A case study of a community health service in remote central Australia found that English literacy is important to everyday functions and social obligations for this community. The problem is there is a mismatch between the training offered and the realities of community life (Kral & Falk 2004).

For education to be successful and to lead to sustainable outcomes it must be integrated into the social and cultural framework of the community. In remote communities struggling to achieve social and economic sustainability, without losing their core cultural values, literacy is only relevant if it is linked in a useful way to the roles and responsibilities in the community.

Further research was conducted by Tropical North Queensland TAFE with teachers, trainers, students and community members to find out how to implement better literacy programs.

The research developed some best-practice principles for training in literacy and numeracy skills for Indigenous students and communities.

- Relationships are all important—more important than content of programs.
- Knowing your student is essential—adult learners bring existing knowledge and skills.
- Training needs to be culturally sensitive—for example, in attitudes to family.
- One-on-one support is needed—in-class tutorial support will get the best results.
- Using real-life texts is beneficial—customise resources to the individual student to make it meaningful.

The research also has some messages for policy-makers.

- Funding needs to be flexible and must accommodate the best-practice principles above.
- There is a strong need to recruit and retain Indigenous staff.
- Cross-cultural training is required, not just cultural awareness.

Professional development opportunities are needed for teachers, with associated funding, support and relief teachers.

Narelle McGlusky and Lenora Thaker, Indigenous Studies Product Development Unit,
Tropical North Queensland Institute of TAFE

Latest research

'Through-care' for Indigenous prisoners

More than 30% of offenders in Australian prisons are Indigenous, and their numbers are growing 1.7 times faster than the non-Indigenous prison population. Indigenous prisoners are likely to be at the lowest end of the education and skills profile prior to entering prison. Upon release many wish to go back to their local communities, which have high unemployment rates and return the prisoners to 'at risk' situations, increasing the likelihood of re-offending.

Research shows that, in Queensland, being involved in VET is associated with a 30% decrease in the chance of returning to prison. If managed properly, VET has great potential for many Indigenous prisoners in breaking the re-offending cycle and providing a pathway to employment.

The nature of the prison system presents many challenges to the delivery of VET. For example, the prisoner is usually required to spend time doing behaviour-related programs and their next priority is often earning some money through jobs in kitchens, laundries and farms, limiting time for vocational training. Also, in some prisons, an old custodial culture still exists, making it difficult to foster the team environment needed to effectively deliver VET programs.

However, the tide is turning. A training culture is emerging in many prisons and there have been positive results for Indigenous prisoners, particularly when a 'through-care' philosophy is applied. This philosophy focuses upon a wider, and more integrated program of rehabilitation, education and training, designed to meet the needs of prisoners both before and after release, including helping prisoners re-integrate back into communities.

In Queensland, this philosophy has seen custodial and VET staff cooperating more closely in their efforts to respond to the diversity of needs of Indigenous offenders. Some responses include:

- providing Indigenous tutors and literacy and numeracy programs before the commencement of VET programs
- providing Indigenous-only classes and one-on-one support from trainers and tutors
- involving Aboriginal Elders in supportive and consultative roles
- selecting training providers on the basis of proven expertise in assisting Indigenous people to find employment.

Professor Victor Callan and John Gardner,
University of Queensland



Forum participants' views on the way forward ...

The views of the participants at the research forum support the research findings. There is a strong sense that Indigenous people want a focus on the holistic outcomes from VET. Self-esteem, confidence, a sense of achievement, paid employment, employability skills, including literacy, information technology, leadership and business skills are all seen as important.

Participants also stressed the need to remember that training is a social process and enjoyment and relationship-building are important outcomes. People also pointed out the broader social benefits VET can provide. It can be a way of building pride in Indigenous culture, a medium for sharing traditional learning styles, creating role models and fostering motivation and resilience.

The seven factors are seen as important in order to facilitate achieving positive outcomes. Sustainable and flexible funding is considered to be fundamental. A 'through-care' approach whereby support is provided before, during and after training, is also a strong theme.

People speak of mentoring, career counselling, tutoring and job placement as critical. Customised, engaging and culturally-appropriate teaching methods and collaborative partnerships between VET providers, schools, universities and employers are also seen as important.

On reflecting on the critical importance of support services, forum participants queried the Australian Government decision to abolish the Aboriginal Tutorial Assistance Scheme, which was considered a valuable contribution to the through-care approach. New Australian Government initiatives are said to incorporate tutorial and mentoring support into broader programs. For details on these initiatives, go to the DEST website at http://www.dest.gov.au/sectors/indigenous_education/default.htm.

Participants at the forum considered all the research presented, the feedback from the floor and discussions with other participants and submitted their views on what actions are now needed to improve outcomes from training for Indigenous Australians. These views are summarised below under the six priority areas of *Partners in a learning culture: The way forward*.

Building the capacity of the VET sector

Strengthen Indigenous voices in decision-making

- 1 Provide ways of listening to Indigenous people in all aspects of VET, from program development to funding, delivery to evaluation—identify and support Indigenous role models and leaders and mentor Indigenous representatives in decision-making bodies.
- 2 A strong Indigenous advisory committee, along the lines of AITAC, with some continuous membership is paramount to achieving VET outcomes.
- 3 *Partners in a learning culture* should continue to be promoted as the way forward.

'Governments should move beyond rhetoric and listen intently and respectfully to Indigenous voices. No approach will work until they do that ... We demand our place as equal partners.'

'Our voices need to be heard, not the interpretation of our voices.'

Grow Indigenous staff at the 'coal face'

- 1 VET needs to build a critical mass of Indigenous staff, particularly teachers and mentors. This can be done through:
 - selling VET as a career choice at schools and promoting teaching as a vocation
 - supporting teachers' aides to inspire them to become teachers
 - identifying gifted students for mentoring and employment in the VET system.
- 2 Indigenous staff should be supported by:
 - providing professional development opportunities
 - establishing an Indigenous network of trainers, assessors, support workers and administrators
 - making the Training and Assessment Training Package specific to Indigenous learners.
- 3 Accountability is needed around providers' employment strategies for Indigenous people.
- 4 More Indigenous-driven, owned and determined registered training organisations should be supported.
- 5 Improved data collection on Indigenous staff is required.

'Providing funding for Indigenous staff is the core business of VET.'

Building the capacity of the VET sector (continued ...)

Improve research and dissemination

- 1 More Indigenous people need to be involved in the generation of research projects and the development and exchange of Indigenous research methodologies.
- 2 Research needs to build on strengths, and not always emphasise deficits. It should focus on the successful case studies, practices and policies and learn from them.
- 3 More effort is needed to link research data with practical outcomes and to disseminate research to people working at the grass roots.
- 4 The negative trends raised in the current research need addressing.
- 5 Research forums should continue as valuable opportunities for stakeholders to voice their concerns, address issues and receive updated information and research.

'Research has been a dirty word. But the face of research is changing as more and more Indigenous people become involved.'

Creating more pathways

Link in with schools

- 1 VET in Schools programs need to be available to junior secondary students to keep them engaged in school past usual drop out points.
- 2 Schools need to be more accountable for retention and outcomes.

'We need to get it right in schools. Aboriginal people need to leave school on a par.'

Provide career guidance

- 1 Students need support in identifying and choosing pathways. More information is needed to raise awareness of options, particularly non-academic streams.
- 2 Students need to be able to see where their certificate can take them. They need advice and assistance on employment and further education pathways.

'Open up doors and let them know what's out there. Give kids choices. There's so much today that people can be.'

Offer financial and other 'non-academic' support

- 1 We need to rethink the financial burden on students. Students need financial support for food, accommodation and transport.
- 2 Abstudy is not working well and needs to be reviewed and improved to encourage students into VET.
- 3 Young mothers need VET pathways. Childcare needs to be provided, in consultation with the community.
- 4 Mentoring is an essential strategy for supporting Indigenous VET students. Communities need to be involved in selecting mentors.
- 5 Aboriginal program units provide good resources and should continue to be supported.

'Support is the biggest thing. If you don't have support, you won't achieve what you want to.'

Provide tutoring

- 1 Ongoing, one-on-one tutoring needs to be available, especially in language, literacy and numeracy.
- 2 Literacy materials need to be culturally appropriate and include practical applications.
- 3 The decision to abolish the Aboriginal Tutorial Assistance Scheme should be reviewed as this program provided valuable support to many students.

'For young Aboriginal people to move forward, there needs to be a great emphasis on education, pathways and enterprise development.'

Improving funding frameworks

Break the reliance on supplementary funding

- 1 Funding models should provide certainty and continuity. Providers cannot afford to be reliant on Indigenous or targeted funding.
- 2 A less fragmented approach is needed. The many funding buckets and accountabilities place a huge burden on organisations and communities.
- 3 Governments need to maintain and back success, rather than creating pilot programs. If there are proven outcomes, follow-up funding should be guaranteed.
- 4 Outcomes need to be recorded differently so that community-based outcomes are seen as legitimate and personal development and achievement is recognised.

'The longer we wait with putting our money where our research is pointing, the dearer it will get and the more damage will be done.'

Improving funding frameworks (continued ...)

Develop flexible funding models that can reflect local needs

- 1 One-size-fits-all funding models are not appropriate for Indigenous communities as they do not take into account different community aims and the different costs of delivery, particularly in remote areas. Funding needs to be flexible so that communities can craft local solutions and new needs can be responded to as they arise.
- 2 Funding needs to reflect costs in:
 - consulting with community members to determine training needs
 - customising training packages
 - providing additional student support
 - taking the time needed to stop, reflect and review successes and problems.

'Teaching isn't just skills. We are currently locked into delivering in a certain timeframe that doesn't allow for value-adding.'

Culturally-appropriate product development and delivery

Mandate cross-cultural training

- 1 The skills and sensitivity of the teacher/trainer is vital to success. Cross-cultural training should be essential in teacher training programs.
- 2 Teachers also need to promote two-way learning whereby they build on Indigenous culture, knowledge and learning styles.

'Fifty per cent of success is due to staff members, due to their empathy, attitudes and what is in their hearts.'

Allow communities to lead training

- 1 Often skills that communities need do not exist in a training package. Training packages should be negotiated with the community and emerge from the local context.
- 2 Community development principles should be incorporated into training, as should cultural values and traditions.

'People want to craft their own solutions—every bit of literature talks about this.'

Build relationships with and between students

- 1 Training needs to be learner-centred, tailored to the individual's needs. This includes acknowledging cultural and language needs and the impact of personal issues on learning.
- 2 Trainers need to take time to get to know students and listen to and act on their aspirations.
- 3 Learning needs to be reconceptualised as a process rather than a product. This can involve:
 - encouraging positive relationships among students so that peers can assist each other
 - harnessing motivation and commitment through the social aspect of VET
 - engaging with families and communities so that the student remains focused.

'[The teachers] support you; really, really help you, really understand and know where people are coming from.'

Be flexible with learning and assessment methods

- 1 Use teaching approaches that are culturally appropriate. These might include:
 - traditional learning styles (e.g. story telling)
 - more visual material and less text
 - intensive attention through small group work
 - applied learning/experiential learning and on-the-job training.
- 2 Assessment should be contextualised and alternative modes used, where appropriate.
- 3 More flexible recognition of prior learning tools are needed as are clearer, simpler processes.

'It's good to look around and see your own mob. Be flexible with learning and assessment methods.'

Links to employment

Provide job placement support

- 1 Students need support to find jobs and sustain employment in the initial stages. This can be done through:
 - case management
 - mentoring
 - vocational placements to improve employability skills
 - cadetships and traineeships.
- 2 VET should link better with the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations to formalise job placement support.
- 3 Employers of Indigenous VET graduates need cross-cultural training and support, particularly mentors and supervisors.

'Real change comes from inside: inside RTOs and big employers.'

Links to employment (continued ...)

Recognise community employment opportunities

- 1 Industry-specific courses do not necessarily meet the needs of communities. Community consultation is needed to identify the skill needs in the local labour market.
- 2 Strategies need to be developed to take advantage of business enterprise opportunities in communities.

'We're sick of training for training's sake. There are economies that our people contribute to.'

Growing VET sector partnerships

Define partnerships

- 1 Indigenous communities and the training provider/funder need to have a clear understanding of their own and each other's expectations from the partnership. A partnership tool kit with sample Memoranda of Understanding and training could assist this.

'We need to be clear about the term 'partnership'. It's never a true partnership. Indigenous people have needs, others have resources.'

Build in time to develop relationships

- 1 Partnerships take time to develop. Engagement with communities can occur through:
 - consultation (yarning time)
 - exchanging staff between organisations to build knowledge and experience.

'Relationships may be the outcome desired as a priority.'

Foster different types of partnerships

- 1 Partnerships need to be stronger and more systemic between schools, community, and VET providers. These partnerships should be linked to funding assistance.
- 2 Community organisations should develop partnerships with organisations that have funding and infrastructure to support their goals—for example, with the mainstream health system to create pathways for health workers.
- 3 Government services for education and support need to be better linked. Agency communication barriers need to be broken down and funding sources across government pooled.

'We want you to be a part of our future but we refuse to be a guest in your domain.'

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